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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Kirkwood Community College (Iowa) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges The six goals in the college's action plan were as follows: (1) create a new course on American pluralism; (2) host a visiting scholars series on American pluralism; (3) restructure the American History curriculum from a two course sequence to a three course sequence, allowing greater time for discussion of pluralism; (4) work on ways to offer linked or blocked courses with pluralism themes; (5) influence the current review of literature courses, encouraging a pluralist focus; and (6) revise the critical thinking component of the "Introduction to Liberal Arts" student orientation program to promote pluralism as a basic element of the Kirkwood experience. The new pluralism course involved four questions: "What does it mean to be an American?"; "What do we hold in common?"; "What divides us?"; and "What brings us together?" All of these goals have either been completed or are in the process. The following still needs to be done: details of the American Pluralism class need to be finalized; progress needs to be made on regrouping of the American History offerings; and communication must be established and maintained. Linked courses remain a problem; only one is being currently offered. (HAA)

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Kirkwood Community College
Exploring America's Communities:
In Quest of Common Ground Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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EXPLORING AMERICA'S COMMUNITIES:

IN QUEST OF COMMON GROUND

Our Institution

Kirkwood Community College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, came into existence as part of community college legislation enacted in 1965 by the state legislature. This legislation mandated that we provide comprehensive service to our community including the first two years of college coursework, vocational-technical training, job training/retraining, high school completion, and continuing education opportunities.

We are the fifth largest higher education institution in the state of Iowa. We have learning centers in each county of our seven county service area. Each center is tied to our main campus via fiber optics and microwave broadcast systems allowing us to offer a full range of classes at each site. Our current enrollment is over 10,000 in credit programs, over 60,000 registrations for community/continuing education classes, and nearly 5,000 enrolled in adult basic education/high school completion programs. We offer more than 55 applied science and technology programs, 16 career option programs, and 48 arts and sciences major areas.

Our seven county service area has a total population of approximately 350,000 including two urban centers, Cedar Rapids/Marion with a population of approximately 116,000 and Iowa City/Coralville with a population of approximately 52,000.

The Goals in Our Action Plan, Our Achievements, and Encountered Obstacles:

A. Create a new course: "Understanding Cultures: American Pluralism."

Based upon the discussion held with Virginia Meyn during her October on-site visit, and with the college Diversity Committee, we have moved to establish goals unique to the American Pluralism course but clearly related to the goals for all of the courses in our "Understanding Cultures" series. We have gone back to the "basic" questions once again, as suggested by Diane Eisenberg in her fax to us dated September 30, 1996:

1. What does it mean to be in America?
2. What do we hold in common?
3. What divides us?
4. What brings us together?

Our discussion of the content of this course is ongoing and still evolving. We have struggled to be inclusive without diluting the basic concept of the course. On December 4, 1996, we held an open meeting of the Diversity Committee to which we invited all interested members of the academic community. The purpose of the meeting was to define diversity within our community and our society. We requested that all attending who wished to speak on the subject provide a written position paper in advance. About 25 attended and more than a dozen submitted position papers. On February 5, 1997, we will be meeting again in an attempt to create an acceptable definition. We see this as central to our continuing progress on the course.

B. Host a visiting scholars series on American pluralism.

This has been done/is being done successfully. We have solicited and obtained cooperation throughout the college community on this project and have scheduled a broad range of activities that appeal to all segments of the academic community. Of special note might be the scheduling of an all-day workshop held on Wednesday, January 8, 1997, on Diversity,

International, and Intercultural Issues. The Stanley Foundation has provided financial support, allowing us to include outstanding speakers and to open the sessions to all interested faculty and staff. Approximately 40 individuals have reserved space at this workshop and, in addition, several of the other community colleges in the state are sending observers.

C. Restructure the American History curriculum from a two course sequence to a three course sequence allowing greater time for discussion of pluralism.

The absence of Peter Jaynes, currently teaching at our sister institution in the People's Republic of China, has clearly slowed these changes. His colleague, Professor Jack Wortman, who taught in the People's Republic of China during the 1995-96 academic year, has taken responsibility for implementation of the needed curricular changes and they are now slowly working their way through the appropriate departmental and committee approvals. We hope that implementation will be possible by Fall 1997.

D. Work on ways to offer linked or blocked courses with pluralism themes.

Our project mentor, Virginia Meyn, during her October site visit, correctly identified problems we have regularly encountered with paired, linked, or blocked courses, both within and outside our Honors program. Large numbers of part-time students, individuals who have met a core requirement in one or more of the linked or paired disciplines and are reluctant to take electives, and scheduling at a time that meets the needs of both staff and potential students all create obstacles.

At this point we do have the support of the Associate Deans in Arts and Humanities, Rhonda Kekke; in Social Science, Dan Tesar (a member of our grant team); and in English, Hope Burwell. All three are willing to work toward finding creative solutions to the difficulties we have

faced in the past. Suggestions from your office regarding successful programs we could examine would be much appreciated.

E. Influence the current review of literature courses encouraging a pluralism focus.

In response to a stated concern within the English Department, Hope Burwell, the Acting Associate Dean, sent an e-mail message to both concerned members of her department and to the three members of the Kirkwood Pluralism Grant team that stated in part:

> The on-going rejuvenation of the literature curriculum will indeed result in some courses which overtly deal with literature from other cultures, as do a number of our courses currently. I would be surprised, in an age when political correctness has been shaping literature curricula for more than 10 years, if we don't end up with an entire roster of core courses which deal with literature from other cultures.

Clearly the review is in progress and a pluralism focus is part of that review.

F. Revise the critical thinking component of the "Introduction to Liberal Arts" student orientation program" promoting pluralism as a basic element of the Kirkwood experience.

This has been successfully completed and was implemented during our Fall 1996 new student orientation.

What Remains to be Done?

In each of the areas we have discussed in this report, we have just started! Specifically, in terms of the grant, we would list the following:

- Details of American Pluralism need to be finalized. At the present time Nick Wysocki, a member of our grant team, is enrolled in an American Pluralism course at the University of Iowa and is using this experience to develop background information for our course.
- Progress needs to be made on regrouping of the American History offerings. The history faculty are in complete agreement with the concept so the remaining obstacles are largely bureaucratic. The absence of Peter Jaynes, the historian primarily responsible for this implementation (discussed earlier in this report) has slowed this activity, but we still hope for Fall 1997 as a target date.

- Linked courses remain a problem. Tentatively, Peter Jaynes will be offering a linked course this fall. He remains the strongest supporter of and advocate for this concept.

- Communication, established as a result of this grant, must be maintained and strengthened. We have discovered many more activities and programs in place than any of us were aware existed. We see the Diversity Committee as an important vehicle in making this happen.

What Has Been the Response of our Students and Colleagues to the Following Questions?

What does it mean to be an American?

No really profound answers here. The most thoughtful answers came from individuals who are or hope to become U.S. citizens through naturalization. We have about 400 international and many immigrant students as well as several faculty and staff members in this category.

An economist on our faculty, born and reared in Ghana and with a Ph.D. from England, talked about a "level playing field." He recognized the existence of racial discrimination but he stressed opportunity based on what rather than who you know.

A young man from Bulgaria stressed hope, and a chance to dream. "At home, opportunity is limited. The economy has collapsed, and I have no real chance for the future. Here (the U.S.) what I can do or be depends on me!"

Overall, the answers centered on the chance to be or do what one wishes, tempered with the recognition that getting there is up to me.

What Divides Us?

All of the standard answers appeared here: race, age, gender, income, geography. Frankly, two of the recurring responses, race and geography, were surprising. In Iowa, racial difference is minimal and yet, in a society where many of our rural or small town students had never gone to school with or even talked to a person of color, they perceived of race as a divisive factor.

The other surprise was parochialism based on geography. "We Iowans" or We Midwesterners" are different from "those people from _____." Our impression in talking to students and faculty were that television has increased racial and regional fears where personal experience had provided no real basis for these fears.

What Brings Us Together?

Again, very diverse responses. Some patriotic, "a love of country," some based on fear of "others." The most interesting answers, however, were those that came further into discussion. "Getting to know other people," showed up in one form or another many times. From students with no experience with anyone of a different background, this answer appeared many times. Once they "knew" other people, the stereotypes began to dissolve.

In an academic institution, we should have anticipated the number of answers that were, in a sense, academically oriented. "Music, good books, food" all occurred in conversation. Television was cited here both as divisive and as bringing us together. Global issues were not major topics. Neither faculty nor students mentioned international organizations such as the U.N.

What Do We Have in Common?

Varied answers here. Many at first appeared to be "off the wall." But a common theme emerged. The more people we talked to the more apparent it became that this common theme was **exposure**. Once they "knew" or "knew about" other people, other traditions, other societies, the more they could identify these people with their own lives. Overall, this response was most gratifying. It indicated that the efforts we have made to expose both our students and our community to a changing society have been quite worthwhile.